THE LAST OF THE PRINCE BISHOPS

William Van Mildert
and the High Church Movement
of the early nineteenth century

E. A. VARLEY

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Victoria 3166, Australia

First published 1992

Printed in Great Britain at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Varley, E. A.
The last of the prince bishops: William Van Mildert and the High Church movement of the early nineteenth century / E. A. Varley.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index
ISBN 0 521 39093 1 (hard)
1. Van Mildert, William, 1765–1836.
2. Oxford movement – England.
I. Title.
BX5199.V29V37 1992
283'.092 – dc20 [B] 91–30016 CIP

ISBN 0521 39093 1 hardback

CE

Contents

Introduction

R. W. Church, Dean of St Paul's, spent the last months of his life working on *The Oxford Movement*, his retrospective on the eventful period 1833–45. He died without completing it, but friends saw it into print in 1891. Church told Lord Acton he aimed

> to preserve a contemporary memorial of what seems to me to have been a true and noble effort that passed before my eyes, a short scene of religious earnestness and aspiration, with all that was in it of self-devotion, affectionateness, and high and refined and varied character, displayed under circumstances which are scarcely intelligible to men of the present time; so enormous have been the changes in what was assumed and acted upon, and thought practicable and reasonable, 'fifty years since'. For their time and opportunities, the men of the movement, with all their imperfect equipment and their mistakes, still seem to me the salt of their generation . . .

Dean Church was speaking of the Tractarians; his words apply with almost the same force to their immediate spiritual forebears, the early nineteenth-century High Church renewal movement remembered as the 'Hackney Phalanx'.

Church would deny the application. For him, 1833 found the 'official' Church leadership 'stunned and bewildered by the fierce outbreak of popular hostility', unready for the crisis. 'They scarcely recognised the difference between what was indefensible and what must be fought for to the death; they mistook subordinate or unimportant points for the key of their position: in their compromises or in their resistance they wanted the guidance of clear and adequate principles, and they were vacillating and ineffective.' The few 'men of active and original minds' who held the true Faith were ineffectual: 'Sound requires atmosphere; and there was as yet no atmosphere in the public mind in which the voice of this theology could be heard.'[1]

The time was, in other words, long overdue for the trumpet-blast of J. H. Newman riding to his beleaguered Mother's rescue.

C. P. S. Clarke's 1932 *The Oxford Movement and After* struck the same note even more emphatically. The Oxford Men's predecessors were there; they held the right theology; but they made nothing of it. 'The question might well be asked, why there was not a Hackney instead of an Oxford Movement, and why tracts and sermons emanating from Hackney instead of Oxford should not have revolutionised the Church.' Clarke's answer was that the Hackney men were too boring ('the High Church services were unutterably dull'), too complacent ('Though they held their own opinions tenaciously, they made little attempt to propagate them') and too comfortable ('they furnished few examples of conspicuous self-denial to kindle the imagination and touch the conscience of humble folk').[2]

This was substantially Newman's own judgement. The *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* damned his predecessors with the faintest possible praise: 'high Church dignitaries, archdeacons, London rectors, and the like, who belonged to what was commonly called the high-and-dry school', and whose '*beau ideal* in ecclesiastical action was a board of safe, sound, sensible men . . . The great point at the time with these good men in London, – some of them men of the highest principle, and far from influenced by what we used to call Erastianism, – was to put down the Tracts.'

While Yngve Brilioth's 1925 study *The Anglican Revival* protested that it was unfair to brand the pre-1830 Church of England as moribund simply because of the dazzle from Oxford Movement pyrotechnics, most historians with High Church sympathies have been content to follow Newman and classify the Hackney men as Right but Repulsive, and pass rapidly over their achievements on the way to richer Tractarian pasturage.

Liberal historiography has rubbished them for other reasons, granting them at most a certain misguided conscientiousness. V. F. Storr's 1913 *The Development of English Theology in the Nineteenth Century* consigned them to the dustbin of history as the last flotsam of an ebbing eighteenth-century tide, defending an indefensible static view of Christian doctrine as once for all given and completed. Having failed to discern the true Evolutionary faith aborning, they were Wrong and hardly even Romantic.

G. F. A. Best, whose 1964 study of Queen Anne's Bounty and the Church Commissioners, *Temporal Pillars*, brought to light important

layers of detail for reconstructing the Hackney Phalanx's work, devoted a 1963 published article to the 'mind and times' of the principal Hackney theological luminary, William Van Mildert. After a painstaking demonstration of Van Mildert's personal integrity, Best savaged him for culpably failing to be convinced by progressive liberalism. The article blamed the defensive cast of Van Mildert's theology, combined with his propensity for explaining political and doctrinal views which he found distasteful as diabolically inspired, for so blinding him to the work of the Holy Spirit in his own generation that he rejected 'the germs of almost every idea that Protestant and liberal Catholic theologians have called into service, over the past century or so, to make Christianity believable in the modern world'.[3]

Reactionist historiography has produced more sympathetic appraisals of the Hackney group. E. R. Norman gave a paragraph of his 1976 epic *Church and Society in England 1770–1970* to demythologising Newman: 'The Church was not spiritually ill-adapted to meet the challenges of a new age – as High Churchmen of the Tractarian School were at some pains to suggest . . . the spiritual life of the Church in the early years of the nineteenth century had an impressive integrity, and the aspiration to extend Christianity to the masses was an external indication of a considerable religious vitality. Despite all the assertions to the contrary, there was a sense in which the Oxford Movement was not so much a protest against a totally arid religious terrain as itself a manifestation of an existing religious renaissance.'[4] J. C. D. Clark's *English Society 1688–1832* (1985) reconstructed the theological and political positions taken by the eighteenth-century Hutchinsonians, the Hackney group's fathers in faith, and detailed the High Church case in the politico–theological struggles around the 1828–32 crisis of the English confessional state.

With the single exception of A. B. Webster's *Joshua Watson: The Story of a Layman, 1771–1855* (1954), a thematic treatment of the major Hackney public initiatives, there have been no studies centred on the Hackney Phalanx since Edward Churton chronicled them in his 1861 *Memoir of Joshua Watson*. P. B. Nockles' 1982 doctoral thesis 'Continuity and change in Anglican High Churchmanship in Britain, 1792–1850' examined Hackney's theology in the context of its antecedents and descendants; R. K. Braine, in 1989, explored the kindred but non-identical theological stance of Herbert Marsh.

Besides G. F. A. Best's exuberant 1963 hatchet job there have

been two biographical studies of William Van Mildert. Immediately after his death in 1836, his cousin-nephew Cornelius Ives, a rural Northamptonshire incumbent and amateur littérateur, produced a biographical essay to preface the posthumous Collected Works. Ives, 'comparatively young in years' and 'prevented by remoteness of situation, and a retiring disposition, from enjoying many opportunities of converse with his revered Relative, or with other public men', protested he had agreed to write only 'in consequence of . . . an assurance that probably no one else could be induced to undertake the work'. The *Memoir* contains quantities of mostly superficial family information, much of it concerned with Van Mildert's health; some valuable correspondence; and a bald outline of his career.

In the 1940s the Revd R. A. Cochrane set out to compile a modern biography of Van Mildert. His researches produced much useful archival material, all of it reproduced in his 1950 B. Litt. thesis – a godsend to later students.

Not enough of Van Mildert's personal writings have survived to make a full biography feasible. Some of his correspondence has been mutilated, apparently by dutiful descendants; Ives' comment, that given his 'highly sensitive constitution' it was 'not . . . to be thought strange, if occasionally he manifested a spirit not incapable of being agitated, or excited', hints tantalisingly at a private person very different from his serene and magisterial public persona. The few personal letters that survive reveal a playful, self-mocking wit and a genuine diffidence about his personal adequacies. He once sent Joshua Watson the manuscript of a lecture for 'last revision' with the comment: 'I have endeavoured to clear it as much as possible of exceptionable matter, and have revised it throughout. On looking over it again I am somewhat more at ease about it than I was, when in a sort of panic I sent it to you . . .'[5]

The present study attempts to reassemble the scattered pieces of the Phalanx jigsaw, reconstructing the life and struggles of Van Mildert and his friends so far as possible in their own words. To demonstrate that they were Tory High Churchmen is trivially easy. I have tried rather to find out how *they* saw their life's work. What did they think they were defending, and against what, and why?

Like Van Mildert's own memorial to Daniel Waterland, this is not a purely antiquarian exercise. My perception is that the issues Van Mildert took to heart and fought for are mostly live and

current. Even his insistence that local mission would be harmed by violating the connection between Church endowment and the particular locality that endowment was given for, has recently been restated by some members of the Archbishops' Commission on Rural Areas.

The question of what makes Christianity 'believable in the modern world' is a complex and controversial one. For Van Mildert, its believability rested on the reliability of the Scriptures and of the living tradition through which the Church interprets them, guaranteed by the unchanging faithfulness of God. That is still the manifesto of significant elements in the modern Church of England.

Theories of knowledge have moved on beyond the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries' reassessments of empirical science. Enlightenment rationalism and General Evolution no longer seem to be the Church's only tools for producing a believable theology. The debate opened by Lesslie Newbigin's *The Other Side of 1984*, arguing that, for fruitful encounter with other great world religions, the Church must not be afraid to develop a theology resting on the fact of faith, is one in which Van Mildert would have valuable insights to contribute.

His understanding of the nature and purpose of the Church has contemporary edge. Van Mildert's insistence on the inseparability of temporal and spiritual concerns remains a corrective against temptations for the Church to accept exclusion from 'politics'. To Van Mildert, the Established Church's calling was to keep the State faithful, struggling to bring the nation's communal life more closely under the Kingship of God. His conviction that the Church of England is answerable for the whole nation and not merely her own active membership also addresses current issues.

Van Mildert was of medium height, with a slight spare frame and a 'strongly expressive' face; 'quick and active, but of a remarkably erect gait, never undignified, and well able, when it behoved him, to assume a highly imposing step and mien'. He emerged for me as a lively, generous and vulnerable man whose insensitivities no less than his considerable strengths grew out of his fierce, protective love for the Reformed and Catholic Church of England.

Despite his genuine respect for Roman catholic tradition, the need he felt on ecclesiological grounds to resist the removal of Roman civil disabilities made it politically impossible for him to do full justice to the elements of 'Popery' which he himself found

valuable. This, surely, is the reason 'why there was not a Hackney instead of an Oxford Movement'. After Catholic Relief was finally lost, the way was clear for the reappropriation of Anglicanism's Catholic inheritance to accelerate away, along a path Van Mildert and his friends had already done much to clear.